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The VALIANTS of VIRGINIA

BY MALLIE ERMINE RIVES (MRS. POST WHEELER)
ILLUSTRATED BY LAUREN STOUT

SYNOPSIS.

CHAPTER I—John Vallant, a rich society favorite, suddenly discovers that the Vallant corporation, which his father founded and which was the principal source of his wealth, has failed.

CHAPTER II—He voluntarily turns over his private fortune to the receiver for the corporation.

CHAPTER III—His entire remaining possessions consist of an old motor car, a white bull dog and Damory court, a neglected estate in Virginia.

CHAPTER IV—He learns that this estate came into the family by royal grant and has been in the possession of the Vallants ever since.

CHAPTER V—On the way to Damory court he meets Shirley Dandridge, an au-burn-haired beauty, and decides that he is going to like Virginia immensely.

CHAPTER VI—An old negro tells Shirley's fortune and predicts great trouble for her on account of a man.

CHAPTER VII—Uncle Jefferson, an old negro, takes Vallant to Damory court.

CHAPTER VIII—Shirley's mother, Mrs. Dandridge, and Major Bristow exchange reminiscences during which it is revealed that the major, Vallant's father, and a man named Sassoon, were rivals for the hand of Mrs. Dandridge in her youth. Sassoon and Vallant fought a duel on her account in which the former was killed.

CHAPTER IX—Vallant finds Damory court overgrown with weeds and creepers and the buildings in a very much neglected condition. Uncle Jefferson and his wife, Aunt Ephie, are engaged as servants.

CHAPTER X—Vallant explores his ancestral home. He is surprised by a fox hunting party which invades his estate. He recognizes Shirley at the head of the party.

CHAPTER XI—He gives sanctuary to the cornered fox. Gossips discuss the advent of the new owner and recall the tragedy in which the elder Vallant took part.

CHAPTER XII—Vallant decides to rehabilitate Damory court and make the land produce a living for him.

CHAPTER XIII—He meets Shirley, who has been gathering flowers on the Vallant estate, and reveals his identity to her.

CHAPTER XIV—Vallant saves Shirley from the bite of a snake which bites him. Knowing the deadliness of the bite, Shirley sucks the poison from the wound and saves his life.

CHAPTER XV—Shirley tells her mother of the incident and the latter is deeply moved at hearing that a Vallant is again living at Damory court.

CHAPTER XVI—Vallant learns some of the history of his family from Doctor Southall and Major Bristow.

CHAPTER XVII—He learns for the first time that his father, the elder Vallant, was a duelist in which Doctor Southall and Major Bristow acted as his father's seconds.

CHAPTER XVIII—Vallant and Shirley become good friends. Mrs. Dandridge faints when she first meets Vallant.

sheer edge of the turf. She swayed toward him and he caught her, feeling for a sharp instant the adorable nearness of her body. It ridged all his skin with a creeping delight. She recovered her footing with an exclamation, and turned back somewhat abashedly to the porch, where she seated herself on the step, drawing her filmy skirt aside to make a place for him. There was a moment of silence which he broke.

"That exquisite serenade you were playing! You know the words, of course."

"They are more lovely, if possible, than the score. Do you care for poetry?"

"I've always loved it," he said. "I've been reading some lately—a little old-fashioned book I found at Damory Court. It's 'Lucie.' Do you know it?"

"Yes, it's my mother's favorite."

He drew it from his pocket. "See, I've got it here. It's marked, too."

He opened it, to close it instantly—not, however, before she had put out her hand and laid it, palm down, on the page. "That rose! Oh, let me have it!"

"Never!" he protested. "Look here. When I put it between the leaves, I did so at random. I didn't see till now that I had opened it at a marked passage."

"Let us read it," she said.

He leaned and held the leaf to the light from the doorway and the two heads bent together over the text.

A sound fell behind them and both turned. A slight figure, in a soft gray gown with old lace at the throat, stood in the doorway behind them. John Vallant sprang to his feet.

"Ah, Shirley, I thought I heard voices. Is that you, Chilly?"

"It's not Mr. Lusk, mother," said Shirley. "It's our new neighbor, Mr. Vallant."

As he bent over the frail hand, murmuring the conventional words that presentations are believed to require, Mrs. Dandridge sank into a deep cushioned chair. "Won't you sit down?" she said. He noticed that she did not look directly at him, and that her face was as pallid as her hair.

"Thank you," said John Vallant, and resumed his place on the lower step.

Shirley, who had again seated herself, suddenly laughed, and pointed to the book which lay between them. "Imagine what we are doing, dearest! We were reading 'Lucie' together."

She saw the other wince, and the deep dark eyes lifted, as if under compulsion, from the book-cover to Vallant's face. He was startled by Shirley's cry and the sudden limp unconscious settling-back into the cushions of the fragile form.

CHAPTER XIX.

Night.

A quicker breeze was stirring as

John Vallant went back along the Red Road. He had waited in the garden at Rosewood till Shirley, aided by Emmaline and with Ramston's anxious face hovering in the background, having performed those gentle offices which a woman's fainting spell requires, had come to reassure him and to say good night.

As he threw off his coat in the bedroom he had chosen for his own, he felt the hard corner of the "Lucie" in the pocket, and drawing it out, laid it on the table by the bedside. He seemed to feel again the tingle of his cheek where a curling strand of her coppery hair had sprung against it when her head had bent beside his own to read the marked lines.

When he had undressed he sat an hour in the candle-blaze, a dressing-gown thrown over his shoulders, striving vainly to recreate that evening talk, to remember her every word and look and movement. For a breath her face would flash suddenly before him, like a live thing; then it would mysteriously fade and elude him, though he clenched his hands on the arms of his chair in the fierce mental

effort to recall it. Only the intense blue of her eyes, the tawny sweep of her hair—these and the touch of her, the consciousness of her warm and vivid fragrance, remained to wrap all his senses in a mist woven of gold and fire.

Shirley, meanwhile, had sat some time beside her mother's bed, leaning from a white chintz-covered chair, her anxiety only partially allayed by reassurances, now and then stooping to lay her young cheek against the delicate arm in its lace sleeve or to pass her hand lovingly up and down its outline, noting with a recurrent passion of tenderness the transparency of the skin with its violet veining and the shadows beneath the closed eyes. Emmaline, moving on soft worsted-shod feet about the dim room, at length had whispered.

"You go tuh bald, honey. I stay with Miss Judith till she go tuh sleep."

"Yes, go, Shirley," said her mother. "Haven't I any privileges at all? Can't I even faint when I feel like it, without calling out the fire-brigade? You'll pamper me to death and heaven knows I don't need it."

"You won't let me telephone for Doctor Southall?"

"Certainly not!"

"And you are sure it was nothing but the roses?"

"Why, what else should it be?" said her mother almost piously. "I must really have the arbores thinned out. On heavy nights it's positively overpowering. Go along now, and we'll talk about it tomorrow. I can ring if I want anything."

In her room, Shirley undressed thoughtfully. There was between her and her mother a fine tenuous bond of sympathy and feeling as rare, perhaps, as it was lovely. She could not remember when the other had not been a semi-invalid, and her earliest childhood recollections were punctuated with the tap of the little cane. Tonight's sudden indisposition had shocked and disturbed her; to faint at a rush of perfume seemed to suggest a growing weakness that was alarming. Tomorrow, she told herself, she would send Ramston with a wagon-load of the roses to the hospital at Charlottesville.

She slipped on a pink shell-shaded dressing-gown of silky silk with a riot of azaleas scattered in the weave, and then, dragging her chair before the open window, drew aside the light curtain and began to brush her hair. All at once her gaze fell upon the floor, and she shrank backward from a twisting thread-like thing whose bright saffron-yellow glowed sharply against the dark carpet. She saw in an instant, however, that it was nothing more dangerous than a fragment of love-vine from the garden, which had clung to her skirt. She picked up the tiny mass of tendrils and with a slow smile tossed it over her right shoulder through the window. "If it takes root," she said aloud, "my sweet-heart loves me." She leaned from the sill to peer down into the misty garden, but could not follow its fall.

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As she leaned out of the stillness there came to her ear a mellow sound. It was the bell of the courthouse in the village. She counted the strokes falling clearly or faintly as the sluggish breeze ebbed or swelled. It was eleven.

She drew back, dropped the curtain to shut out the wan glimmer, and in the darkness crept into the soft bed as if into a hiding-place.

A warm sun and an air mildly mellow. A faint gold-shadowed mist over the valley and a soft lilac haze blending the rounded outlines of the hills. Through the shrubbery at Damory Court a cardinal dived like a crimson shuttle, to rock impudently from a fleeing limb, and here and there on the bluish-ivory sky, motionless as a pasted wave, hung a hawk; from time to time one of these wavered and slanted swiftly down, to climb once more in a huge spiral to its high tower of sky.

Perhaps it wondered, as its telescopic eye looked down. That had been its choicest covert, that disheveled tangle where the birds held perpetual carnival, the weasel lurked in the underbrush and the rabbit lined his windfall. Now the wildness was gone. A pergola, glistening white, now upheld the runaway vines, making a sickle-like path from the upper terrace to the lake. In the barn loft the pigeons still quarrelled over their new crops of fresh pine, and under a clump of locust trees at a little distance from the house, a half-dozen dolls' cabins on stilts stood waiting the honey-storage of the black and gold bees.

There were new denizens, also. These had arrived in a dozen zinc tanks and willow hampers, to the amazement of a sleepy express clerk at the railroad station: two swans now sailed majestically over the lily-ponds of the lake, along its gravel rim and a pair of bronze-colored ducks waddled and preened, and its placid surface rippled and broke to the sluggish backs of goldfish and the flitting fins of red Japanese carp.

The house itself wore another air. Its look of unkemptness had largely vanished. The soft gray tone of age remained, but the bleakness and forlornness were gone; there was about all now a warmth and genial bearing that hinted at mellowed beauty, firelight and cheerful voices within.

Vallant heaved a long sigh of satisfaction as he stood in the sunlight gazing at the results of his labors. He was not now the flippant boulevardier to whom money was the sine qua non of existence. He had learned a sovereign lesson—one gained not through the push and fight of crowds, but in the simple peace of a countryside, untroubled by the clamor of gold and the complex problems of a competitive existence—that he had inherited a need of activity, of achievement that he had been born to do.

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With one hand on the dog's collar, hushing him to silence, Vallant, unseen, looked at the wretched place with a shiver. He had glimpsed many wretched purlieus in the slums of great cities, but this, in the open sunlight, with the clean woods about it and the sweet clear blue above, stood out with an unrelieved boldness and contrast that was doubly sinister and forbidding. He knew instantly that the tawdry corner was the community known as Hell's-Half-Acre, the place to which Shirley had made her night ride to rescue Rickney Snyder.

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